

Session Title: Keeping it S.L.O.W.

Session Length (Suggested 60–90 minutes)

Goals and Objectives:

- Explore their understanding of themselves and their own reactions.
- Identify their own tipping points in difficult or conflicting interactions.
- Utilize techniques for de-escalation using S.L.O.W. framework.
- Practice the S.L.O.W. framework using scenarios to become comfortable with the techniques.

Materials and Supplies:

- White Board or Poster Paper and markers.
- Large displayed copy of the S.L.O.W. acronym somewhere in the room to reference.
- **RED**, **YELLOW**, and **GREEN** Dot Cards.
- Scenarios (on a projected screen or handout).

Note: Not everyone will feel comfortable taking their team through this lesson plan. However, there is probably someone within your park that would be happy to help. Possible facilitators include: ACE trained interpreters, training facilitators, Sites of Conscience trained facilitators, and Allies for Inclusion.

Note for Facilitator: Regular text denotes your “script” for this training. Content in *[brackets and italics]* are instructions for the session’s leaders.

Introducing S.L.O.W. (5 minutes)

Most of us are used to having meaningful and positive conversations with visitors about our resources, the world around us, and the NPS as an agency.

Unfortunately, not all conversations go that way. In some cases, we are instead the recipient of negative words and energy. It's important to prepare for all kinds of conversations, not just the fun ones. This discussion will guide us through the **SLOW** method of de-escalation through genuine conversation.

SLOW is not a process, it's a suite of techniques to deploy when you need them. You don't follow them in order—you use them in small bits as you interact with visitors.

SLOW is really useful for the conversations we didn't start—when a visitor approaches with a problem or complaint about the park, other visitors, or the interpretation we offer.

Stay Cool (15–20 minutes)

The “S” in SLOW stands for “Stay Cool.”

We've all done it, lost our cool. Whether the reason was justifiable or not, we all have things that upset us to the point of letting our emotions control our behavior. We are not robots, and you are not expected to just flip a switch and be calm all the time. If we can explore what some of our tipping points are, we may be able to recognize early when something is going to make us upset.

We're going to talk about some hard things in this session, so let's learn a technique to help us stay cool right away.

[Guide participants through a deep breathing exercise—have them close their eyes, take a deep breath in, hold for 3 seconds, and slowly blow it out. Repeat this 3–4 times.]

We'll be talking about things that could be triggers of past trauma. You have permission to leave or stay silent if you need to—your mental and physical safety is most important.

[Ask participants to answer the following question in pairs or triads, then unwrap the conversation with the larger group.]

- What kinds of behaviors in others cause you to lose your cool?
- What does that feel like?
- Do you get a physical reaction that serves as a warning sign that things might escalate?

Practicing tough conversations is like practicing a sport: Repetition is everything. The more you can practice your responses, the easier it will get. We will be going through some scenarios later that will help us practice our responses.

[Ask the following question of the whole group and capture their responses on a white board or poster paper.]

- What are some things that you do to stay cool?

Listen (15–20 minutes)

The “L” in SLOW stands for “Listen.”

Taking a moment to listen is not only beneficial to the visitor, it’s beneficial to you too. A quick, knee-jerk reaction to a statement or behavior may escalate a situation. Listening also makes the visitor feel important, understood, and less threatened.

[Ask participants to reflect on the following question, then share in pairs or triads. After their small group discussions, capture the conversation on a white board or poster paper.]

- Think about that person in your life who is a really good listener. How do you know you are being listened to? What qualities or traits does that person have?

I wanted to share with you a few questions that you might use to show someone you’re listening and encourage them to tell you more about their situation. But I also want to gather your ideas for our park too. Here are a few to get us started:

[Share the following questions on a white board or poster paper, and then ask the participants to create their own clarifying and listening questions to add to the list.]

- Where did you first come to believe/understand that?
- Why is that belief important to you?
- How has that view shaped who you are?
- When have you interacted with someone who didn’t believe that?

Offer Validation (15–20 minutes)

The “O” in SLOW stands for “Offer Validation.”

Sometimes, when we are upset, we just want to know that our feelings are valid. To be clear, we are not asking you to agree with the visitor, but instead to acknowledge that they are upset and if you felt challenged, threatened, or ignored, you’d feel upset too. Their beliefs might feel questionable, but their feelings are real.

Offering validation is not about sacrificing your own truths or facts—it’s about validating the person standing in front of you and acknowledging their humanity. I want to make sure we don’t violate who we are and what we believe when talking to visitors. So, I want to brainstorm a list for our park of ways we can show people they matter and are heard without ceding what we hold dear. I’ve got a couple phrases brainstormed already but would like to add more to the list.

[Share the following phrases on a white board or poster paper, and then ask the participants to create their own ideas to add to the list.]

- That sounds like a frustrating situation...
- I can understand where you’re coming from...
- If I was out of my comfort zone, I’d feel scared too...

Walk Away (15–20 minutes)

The “W” in SLOW stands for “Walk Away.”

Sometimes, no matter how cool, patient, or empathetic you are being, you won’t be able to calm a situation. Also, no matter how much you prepare, sometimes we can’t keep our cool. It’s okay to walk away and get help.

Let’s brainstorm the warning signs that it’s time to walk. Answer this question in pairs, then we’ll come back and compare notes.

[Ask participants to answer the following question in pairs or triads, then unwrap the conversation with the larger group and capture the ideas on a white board or poster paper.]

- What are some signs that tell you when it’s time to walk away? In yourself? In someone else?

What’s good “exit language?” Sometimes the problem still needs to be solved. Sometimes it can’t be. Let’s brainstorm some phrases or ways you can escape a hostile situation. I’ve pulled together some seeds to start from:

[Share the following phrases on a white board or poster paper, and then ask the participants to create their own ideas to add to the list.]

- I am sorry but I need to leave
- I’m not going to be able to help you with this but let me find someone who can.
- Your language/behavior is making me/others feel unsafe, I’m going to excuse myself.
- I think we’ve explored all the solutions I can think of, would you like to speak to a supervisor/law enforcement ranger instead?
- Would you like to fill out a comment card? It will go directly to the superintendent.

Testing Out These Skills (15–20 minutes)

*[Hand out the **GREEN**, **YELLOW**, and **RED** cards to the participants and explain the next activity.]*

Each scenario will be unique, and each of us have unique experiences. What may feel like an easy situation to one of us might feel more complicated to another. It’s important that our team understands what each other’s strengths are. It will make your team stronger in the end.

We’re going to try out a few scenarios. For each scenario, I want you to hold up one of your cards. This is your gut-check.

As you read each scenario in the attached document, hold up a **GREEN** card if you feel confident addressing this scenario, **YELLOW** if you feel a bit nervous, or **RED** if you feel like the scenario would feel unsafe.

[Display a scenario and read it aloud. Ask participants to raise their cards. Then pose the following questions...]

For our **GREEN** folks—Why do you feel comfortable with this situation?

For our **YELLOW** and **RED** folks—What is challenging about this situation for you? What would make it feel less challenging?

For **ALL** of us – which of the S.L.O.W. techniques would you use with this person?

[If participants are having trouble deciding on a SLOW technique, you can use some of the following questions to help them build empathy for the visitor and decide their response.]

- What do you think this person is going through right now? Are they feeling challenged, threatened, or unsafe?
- How can you relate to this person?
- What do you think this person wants from you?
- How can we respond to this specific person?

Conclusion (2–5 minutes)

There is no shame in walking away. There is no shame in protecting your mental, emotional, and physical safety. The goal isn't to "win" something, it's to make the situation safer for everyone, including you.

You may recognize right away that walking away is your only option. Like we said before, SLOW isn't meant to be followed in order, but rather individual tools to be used at your discretion.